

Ecological Consciousness and Interconnectedness in John Steinbeck's *The Red Pony*: An Ecocritical Study

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Abstract

This research paper examines ecological consciousness in *The Red Pony* by John Steinbeck from an environmental perspective. It argues that the novel highlights the deep interconnection among human beings, the land, and animals through the experiences of the major characters, Jody Tiflin and Billy Buck. Their actions show how humans depend on land and animals for survival, how animals rely on humans and nature, and how nature itself gains meaning through its relationship with living beings, creating a harmonious and mutually supportive system necessary for coexistence. To analyze this relationship, the study adopts an ecological reading of the primary text and draws on major ecocritical theorists such as Aldo Leopold, Peter Singer, Lawrence Buell, and Paul Taylor, whose ideas help frame the novel's environmental insights. The findings reveal that *The Red Pony* is rich in depictions of interdependence among humans, land, and animals, and the study concludes that Steinbeck successfully portrays ecological awareness by emphasizing that the survival and significance of each element of the natural world depend on their interconnected roles.

Keywords: ecological harmony, human-nature interconnection, co-existence

Introduction

The significant argument of this study is that literature like *The Red Pony* reveals the deep interconnectedness of human beings, animals, and the natural world, showing their mutual dependence for survival and meaning. In recent years, ecology in literature has gained increasing prominence as global environmental concerns have intensified. An ecological approach to literary analysis helps readers understand how humans have historically perceived and interacted with nature. Ecocriticism examines the portrayal of

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nature in texts, the consequences of human actions on the environment, and the role of literature in fostering environmental awareness. Within this framework, the study highlights how ecological criticism emphasizes the inseparable bond between humans, animals, and the environment.

Steinbeck's *The Red Pony* is a coming-of-age novella about Jody Tiflin, a young boy's life on his father's ranch in California's Salinas Valley. Through four interconnected stories, 'The Gift,' 'The Great Mountain,' 'The Promise,' and 'The Leader of the People,' the main character, Jody, learns about responsibilities, mortality, and life's hardship. His red pony, Gabilan, becomes ill and after some time dies, which teaches young and innocent Jody about the loss of something loveable. Interactions with Gitano, an elderly man seeking to end his life on the ranch of Jody's family, expand Jody's understanding of the aging legacy and ambition of human beings. The birth of a new foal following the death of mare Nellie focuses on the cyclical nature of life and death. Steinbeck's full depiction of the natural world and the bond between human and their environment underscores the narrative themes of growth, resilience, and the transition from innocence to maturity.

Several scholars have analyzed *The Red Pony* from different critical perspectives, providing a useful background for the present study. The extensive use of this story by scholars from various perspectives indicates that numerous references can support this research. Many previous researchers have applied the theory that will be utilized in this study, providing valuable assistance. Numerous writers have written on Steinbeck's *The Red Pony* from different critical approaches. Here, for review few writers who have written from different perspectives have been cited. There are various issues raised, but ecological consciousness and the significance of land attachment have not been discussed extensively in this fictional writing. In this regard, Ben Ali, in his writing, talks about human and non-human relations in his article, *The Human and Animal Bond in Red Pony*. He talks about the power of human beings as powerful as a powerless creature in nature. He writes, "Jody Tiflin lives on a ranch wherein there is an endless struggle between the powerful and the powerless" (1). According to Ali, the little boy is presented as a powerful being who can take control over animals. The struggle between humans and animals is highlighted in his research article. But there is a strong bond in which animals depend upon humans, and human beings depend upon animals for their survival.

Regarding place attachment in *The Red Pony*, Lahdenranta Fredrika offers an important insight. She argues that place is not merely a physical space providing shelter for humans and animals; rather, it is a vast resource that allows individuals to develop their identity. She explains, “It is not merely a physical space for him to inhabit, but a rich environment in which he can explore his own personality, his growth as a human being, his moral landscape and role as an ethical being within the world” (56). According to Fredrika, land is a resource where human life can flourish as it satisfies basic needs, and therefore, a place carries emotional significance beyond its physical form. However, she does not address human–animal relationships in her study. Derek Gladwin also discusses the connection between characters and land, emphasizing the integration of nature and environment in the narrative. He states that “The Gift, the first story in the cycle, opens with a description of Jody's inter-reliance with the parts of his surroundings [farm community]” (68). His argument highlights human dependence on land for survival and warns against the overexploitation of natural resources. Likewise, Arlita Widyaniza focuses on Jody's behavior, particularly his mischievous and violent actions after the death of his pony. She notes that “Jody became mischievously violent towards animals after his pony died” (8), showing how emotional distress can influence human behavior.

While these scholars address place attachment, environmental integration, and psychological response, they do not explore the ecological consciousness reflected in the mutual dependence of humans, animals, and land. This study seeks to fill that gap by examining how *The Red Pony* portrays the interconnected relationship between the environment, the animals that shape Jody's growth, and the human reliance on land for survival and identity formation. By linking place attachment with human–animal relationships, this research highlights the ecological awareness embedded in Steinbeck's narrative, which earlier studies have not sufficiently discussed.

Building on the gaps identified in previous studies, this research examines *The Red Pony* through the combined lens of ecological consciousness, human–animal relationship, and land attachment. The novel presents a powerful depiction of interdependence, where human beings, animals, and the land function as a unified ecological system. Jody's growth is shaped not only by the guidance of adults but also by his emotional and practical interactions with the horses, which reveal the mutual reliance of humans and animals for survival, learning, and emotional fulfillment. At the same time, Steinbeck's portrayal of the ranch landscape highlights that land is more than a

physical setting; it is a source of identity, nourishment, and ethical responsibility. By integrating these elements, the study argues that Steinbeck's narrative cultivates ecological consciousness by showing that human identity and moral development emerge from a respectful, balanced, and interconnected relationship with both the natural environment and the animals who inhabit it.

Methodology

The study follows a qualitative research design, using close textual analysis to examine ecological elements in *The Red Pony*. By applying key concepts from major ecocritical theorists, the research interprets how the text represents the relationships among humans, animals, and the land. This research paper used Ecological criticism to analyze the primary text, *The Red Pony*. Theorists such as Aldo Leopold argue that ethical treatment should be extended to the land. Peter Singer, who is known for his advocacy of animal rights. Lawrence Buell argues that literature plays a crucial role in shaping environmental consciousness and policy. Paul Taylor advocates for a respectful relationship with nature for harmonious coexistence. These Theorists' valuable insights are applied for understanding the ecological themes in *The Red Pony*.

Analysis and Discussion

The argument that Steinbeck portrays humans, animals, and nature to highlight coexistence is evident in Jody's experiences on his father's ranch. His close bond with Gabilan and other animals illustrates the mutual dependence between humans and the natural world, where care, responsibility, and empathy shape his understanding of life. Steinbeck shows that Jody's growth into manhood is intertwined with his awareness of the cycles of life and death, the lessons of loss, and the ethical treatment of living beings. Through these experiences, the novella emphasizes that human development and moral consciousness are inseparable from engagement with animals and the land, reinforcing the theme of interconnectedness and ecological harmony. This novella offers a profound exploration of the human-animal relationship. Through the experiences of the major character, a ten-year-old boy named Jody Tiflin, and his attachment, especially to a red pony named Gabilan and various animals on his father's ranch. Steinbeck explores

themes of life, death, responsibility, and the unavoidable loss that comes with growing up a young boy into manhood.

In *The Red Pony*, the relationship between humans and animals is central to the narrative. Steinbeck uses this relationship to explore complex themes and to illustrate the emotional and psychological growth of his main character, Jody. Steinbeck writes, “The pony’s eyes glittered, and he edged around in kicking position. But Jody touched his high arched neck as he had always seen Bill Buck do, and he crooned, “So-o-o, boy” in a deep voice. The Pony gradually relaxed his tenseness” (14). This excerpt states the relationship of humans and animals when the boy comes close to the pony, and its eyes show happiness and feel a kind of relaxation. Peter Singer, in his book *Animal Liberation*, writes, “Those who have studied the behavior of other animals and those who have animals as companions soon learn to understand their responses as well as we understand those of an infant, and sometimes better” (46). It is understood that Jody has knowledge about the behavior of the animals and how to make the pony anxiety-free when he touches the body of the pony.

In *The Red Pony*, the major character Jody Tiflin has a special relationship with the land where he lives. Jody lives on a farm in a valley near the city of Salinas, surrounded by mountain ranges. This natural landscape shapes his daily life and influences his sense of belonging. The text shows how closely Jody observes his environment when it describes how “Jody topped the hill and looked down on the ranch again... at the ranch house, he found his mother sitting on the porch, mending socks” (6). This moment demonstrates Jody’s habit of engaging with the land—climbing hills, watching the ranch from above, and noticing the people and activities within it. The citation supports the idea that Jody’s bond with the land is built through his constant movement across the ranch and his attention to its details. Jody’s family leads a simple rural life, and his days are filled with household chores such as gathering wood, feeding chickens, and taking care of his favorite animal red pony. Jody’s existence is connected to the land and the natural surroundings where he lives. In the primary text, Steinbeck points out, “Jody continued on through the large vegetable patch where the green corn was higher than his head. The corn pumpkins were green and small yet. He went on to the sagebrush line where the cold spring ran out of its pipe and fell into a round wooden tub. He leaned over and drank close to the green mossy wood where the water tasted best (4-5). To support the above idea, Aldo Leopold focuses, “The land ethic simply enlarges

the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals; or collectively: the land” (204). Jody’s community is comprised of different animals, natural resources from the land where he lives, such as water, plants, trees, etc.

Gabilan, the red pony in *The Red Pony*, symbolizes hope, growth, and the development of responsibility in Jody, marking his transition from childhood to adolescence.

Gabilan's arrival marks a significant moment in his life, representing his transition from childhood to adolescence and his flourishing sense of responsibility. When Jody's father, Carl Tiflin gives him the red pony, Jody is filled with excitement and pride. The pony represents not just a gift, but a promise of independence and maturity. Steinbeck describes Jody's initial reaction is that "Jody's throat collapsed in on itself and cut his breath short” (10). This reaction highlights the emotional impact of receiving Gabilan and sets the stage for their bond. Jody's early interactions with Gabilan are filled with a sense of wonder and dedication. He spends hours grooming and feeding the pony, demonstrating his commitment to taking care of him. Steinbeck writes, "Jody never waited for the triangle to get him out of bed after the coming of the pony. It became his habit to creep out of bed even before his mother was awake, to slip into his cloths and to go quietly down to the barn to see Gabilan” (15-16). These detailed descriptions of Jody's care emphasize his growing attachment and the sense of responsibility he feels towards Gabilan. Before the entry of the pony it was difficult for him to wake up, but after the coming of the pony, he started to wake up before his mother. To connect with this idea, Immanuel Kant is worth mentioning. In an article Rational Beings Alone Have Moral Worth he writes, “Animal nature has analogies to human nature, and by doing our duties to animals in respect of manifestations which correspond to manifestations of human nature, we indirectly do our duty towards humanity” (86). Through his devoted care for Gabilan, Jody not only cultivates a sense of responsibility and empathy toward animals but also fulfills a moral duty that extends to humanity, reflecting Kant’s idea that ethical treatment of animals nurtures broader moral development.

While Gabilan is the central animal in the novella, other animals also play a significant role in Jody's life and contribute to the overarching themes of the story. These animals, including the buzzards, the black colt, and Nellie the mare, each bring their own lessons and experiences. The buzzards that appear after Gabilan's death are symbolic of the inevitability of death and the natural cycle of life. Their presence is a stark reminder

of the harsh realities of the world Jody is growing up in. Steinbeck describes the buzzards in a way that underscores their ominous nature as "[h]e looked up and saw a high circle of black buzzards, and slowly revolving circle dropped lower and lower " (42). This imagery reinforces the sense of finality and the unchanging nature of death. Jody's reaction to the buzzards is one of anger and defiance.

In *The Red Pony*, Jody's care for Gabilan, his newborn pony, forces him to confront the realities of responsibility and loss, shaping his understanding of life's joys and sorrows. Billy Buck, the ranch hand, plays a crucial role in shaping Jody's understanding of animals and the natural world. Billy's experience and wisdom provide Jody with guidance and support for helping him navigate the challenges he faces. Billy's relationship with the animals is marked by respect and deep knowledge. His advice and actions often reflect a profound understanding of the natural world. For example, when Gabilan falls ill, Billy does everything he can do to help, but he also understands the limits of human intervention. Steinbeck writes, "Billy Buck stood up from the box and surrendered the cotton swab" (41). This moment emphasizes the acceptance of nature's unpredictability and the humility required in dealing with it. Billy's mentorship helps Jody develop a more nuanced perspective on the human-animal relationship, blending compassion with realism. Carl Tiflin, Jody's father, represents a more pragmatic and less sentimental approach to animals. His interactions with Jody and the animals reflect a belief in discipline and responsibility. Carl's expectations for Jody are clear, and he sees the animals primarily in terms of their utility. While Carl's approach may seem harsh at times, it is also an important part of Jody's education. Carl's insistence on responsibility and hard work helps Jody develop a strong sense of duty. For instance, Carl's reaction to Gabilan's death is pragmatic when Jody killed a buzzard, he said, "The buzzard didn't kill the pony. Don't you know that?" (44). This reaction contrasts with Jody's emotional response and underscores the different ways people cope with loss. Through Carl, Jody learns the importance of resilience and the necessity of moving forward despite setbacks.

The culmination of Jody's experiences with the animals leads to significant personal transformation. He evolves from a naive and carefree boy into a more mature and thoughtful individual. The lessons he learns from Gabilan, Nellie, and the other animals shape his character and prepare him for the complexities of adulthood. Steinbeck captures this transformation subtly but effectively. By the end of the novella, Jody's interactions with the animals reflect a deeper understanding and a more balanced

perspective. "He thought of Nellie as he walked, and of the little colt" (82). To connect with this, Holly L. Wilson is worth mentioning. He writes, "Animals, in contrast to matter, have an inner principle that gives rise to spontaneous movement. Here is a clear and significant difference between things and animals. Such a distinction gives rise to the presumption that animals should be treated differently from things" (88). Jody develops kind, humane feelings after he has tender feelings towards animals. He treats his pony as his friend, like a human being. His journey is marked by growth, resilience, and an acceptance of the cycles of life and death.

The human-animal relationships in *The Red Pony* underscore the themes of resilience and adaptation. Jody's ability to learn from his experiences and continue to grow despite setbacks reflects the resilience required to navigate life's challenges. Steinbeck portrays this resilience through Jody's character development and his evolving relationship with the animals. Peter Singer further states about this in his book *Animal Liberation*, he opines that ". . . this way we can argue for equality for animals without getting embroiled in philosophical controversies about the ultimate nature of rights" (37). The lessons Jody learns about the equality of animals' responsibility towards animals, patience, and acceptance are crucial for his growth and adaptation.

Secondly, in *The Red Pony*, the concept of land ethic is woven into the narrative through the characters' interactions with their environment. The novella emphasizes a deep respect for nature and the responsibilities of stewardship. These experiences, coupled with wisdom from his elders, reflect a growing awareness and respect for the land, illustrating the core principles of a land ethic. Aldo Leopold's environmental ethics, as explained in his book *The Land Ethic*, emphasizes that land should not be viewed merely as property or a resource. Instead, he argues that the land, plants, and animals together form a biotic community in which all elements are interdependent. This principle is vividly reflected in the first story of *The Red Pony*, "The Gift," which opens with Jody's connection to his father's ranch. As he begins performing household responsibilities, Jody observes the growth of corn and pumpkins in the vegetable patch and notices the "sagebrush line," the "green mossy wood," and the "red geraniums" and "cypress tree" (5) near the house. His surroundings also include chickens, dogs, and the tub from which he drinks water. These observations mirror Leopold's concept of a biotic community, where every living and non-living element is connected. Through these

depictions, Steinbeck demonstrates that Jody's place in the physical world depends on his awareness of and interaction with the interdependent elements of his environment.

Jody starts to understand how fragile life is, beginning his journey of learning about the environment. To truly feel connected with all living things, he must experience this fragility. However, Jody still has more painful lessons to go through to develop his environmental awareness. When the pony gets sick and dies, Jody faces the harsh reality of nature's balance. Losing the pony makes Jody more aware of the changing world around.

In "The Great Mountains," the next story in the novella, Jody starts to rebel by attacking the living creatures he loves doing some silly types of things such as, "He throws rocks at the swallows' nests under the eaves and "tricks his dog, Doubletree Mutt, into putting his nose in a mousetrap". But when his mother scolds him in his changed behavior he feels bad, "Jody feels bad and throws a rock at Mutt". "He then decides to kill a bird with a slingshot" (45-46). After hunting and killing the bird, Jody realizes how cruel and pointless his actions were. He notices the bird looks much smaller dead than alive and feels guilty, cutting off the bird's head. Then he realized animals and humans share a lot of similarities. It is said that there's a lot of human nature in animals, or that there's a lot of animal nature in human beings. Humans and animals both are made of the same basic materials, their bodies function in similar ways, and their instincts and emotions are often the same. Our instincts, impulses, preferences, connections, and conflicts are driven which come from our race and family backgrounds.

Jody's act of smashing a green muskmelon and his immediate sense of regret illustrate the moral and ecological lessons embedded in *The Red Pony*. Rather than simply describing his behavior, this moment reflects his gradual understanding of the interconnectedness of life on the farm. Through such actions, Jody tests the boundaries of independence, but the expectations of his family, Billy and his father, Carl reinforce an ecological ethic aligned with Leopold's principle: "[a] thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise" (262). In taking responsibility for his actions, Jody begins to comprehend the consequences of disrupting the natural cycle, recognizing that life is temporary and each being has a role within the biotic community. His loss of the pony, Gabilan, and subsequent experiences with life and death do not merely teach him about personal loss; they cultivate an awareness of the balance and harmony required to coexist

ethically with animals and the land. Therefore, Jody's journey is not just a coming-of-age story; it exemplifies the development of ecological consciousness, showing how human behavior must align with the integrity of the natural world.

In "The Gabilan Mountains," Jody's experiences symbolize his transition from childhood to manhood, highlighting how his interactions with the natural world shape his physical, mental, and emotional growth. Jody is on the verge of manhood, physically, mentally, and emotionally. It is noted that the story depicts the "passage from naïve childhood to the threshold of adulthood of Jody through knowledge of birth, old age, and death, gained through experience with the horse. Similarly, Arnold Goldsmith's essay, *Thematic Rhythm in The Red Pony*, compares "Jody's experiences in *The Red Pony* to the initiatory experiences leading to manhood found in the Nick Adams stories from Ernest Hemingway's *In Our Time*" (392). While these interpretations highlight Jody's classical initiation, they overlook his growing environmental awareness. When Jody looks at the mountains to the west, he feels a sense of fright:

[h]e thought often of the miles of ridge after ridge until at last there was the sea. When the peaks were pink in the morning they invited him among them: and when the sun had gone over the edge in the evening and the mountains were a purple-like despair, then Jody was afraid of them. (177)

The "miles of ridge after ridge" represent the journey of life leading to death, while also drawing Jody in with their charm, "Jody knew something was there, something very wonderful because it wasn't known, something secret and mysterious. He could feel within himself that this was so" (48-49). Early in the morning, the sun's presence feels inviting for Jody, but during the night, the "purple-like despair" makes him apprehensive. Crossing the mountains symbolizes Jody's crossing in the course of time, mirroring a journey across the land that shape his understanding of the natural world. Jody eventually returns to the natural world, much like the pony named "Gabilan."

Steinbeck, in this novella, describes mountains, animals, trees, and the house as intertwined objects like Leopold in the surrounding landscape:

The house gleamed with white light and the barn was brown and warm. The red cows on the farther hill ate their way slowly toward the north. Even the dark cypress tree by the bunkhouse was usual and safe. The chickens scratched about in the dust of the farmyard with quick waltzing steps. (50)

Like Gitano, the Great Ones are mystifying, aged, wrinkled, and deeply connected to their native land. Gitano's "eyes were large and deep and dark," while "his face was as dark as dried beef," but mostly, "Gitano was mysterious like the mountains" (61). Gitano exemplifies the unbreakable bond between humanity and the land. His desire to return to his birthplace highlights the connection between humans and the layers of the land. By dying and being buried in the great mountain, his birthplace place Gitano, becomes the bottom layer of the Leopold's land pyramid, then through Gitano, Jody begins to understand the human reliance on the land, as seen in native traditions. Gitano's frequent plea to Jody's father Carl Tiflin, "But I was born here" (61), shows Gitano's instinctual connection to the land, similar to the "energy circuit" Leopold describes (255). Witnessing Gitano's deep bond with his birthplace profoundly affects Jody, who "thought of the rapier and of Gitano. And he thought of the great mountains. A longing caressed him, and it was so sharp that he wanted to cry to get it out of his breast . . . he was full of nameless sorrow" (67-68). The "nameless sorrow" represents Jody's realization that human beings can never run away from their biotic community, even after death.

Steinbeck explores a deeper understanding of human beings in both chapters, "The Promise" and "The Leader of the People," that the omnivores are at the top of the land pyramid. Throughout his novels, Steinbeck consistently places people within their biotic communities. Louis Owens argues that Steinbeck "spent a lifetime attempting to bring about an alteration in the way Americans conceive of our relationship with the place we inhabit, attempting to help us 'grow up' and learn to live responsible and holistically"(2). Billy Buck becomes the voice of emphasizing man's interconnectedness with nature in the third story of the novella "The Promise." Similar to Jody's inspection of Gitano's bond with the land, he follows Billy Buck finds out about the human connection to the environment. Leopold notes that "[m]an is one of thousands of accretions to the height and complexity of the pyramid," we must also realize that the "invention of tools has enabled him to make changes of unprecedented violence, rapidity, and scope" (253-4). Billy acts as the ranch's ethical conscience, monitoring the "tools" that can cause harm within the biotic community. He teaches Jody to respect and appreciate the land and its residents. As Leopold suggests, "It is inconceivable . . . that an ethical relation to land can exist without love, respect, and admiration for land, and a high regard for its value" (261). Billy's conviction in this ethos provides Jody not only with a mentor but also with a father figure and an ecological guide. Jody inquires of Billy, "You'll tell me what to do

about everything, won't you?" (86-7). Billy's response is clean, "Why I'm half horse myself, you see" (87). Billy represents the deep ecology philosophy by promoting harmony with nature, utilizing the land solely for essential needs, and recognizing the intrinsic value of nature. Carl Tiflin emphasizes that "there's not a man in this country that knows more about colts than Billy" (91). No doubt, Billy is the only person on Carl Tiflin's ranch who truly understands the balance of the farm community, leading Jody to see him as flawless. However, when Gabilan dies, Jody begins to see Billy more objectively, recognizing the humility in human limitations. Billy has realized that he is "capable of failure, and "[t]his knowledge made Billy much less sure of himself than he had been" (90). The line shows that Billy recognizes human limitations within the natural world, emphasizing humility, responsibility, and the need to respect the interdependence of all elements in the biotic community. When Billy delivers the colt from Nellie's fresh carcass, he accentuates the fact that he delivered the colt as he "promised": "There's your colt. I promised. And there it is. I had to do it—had to" (94). Humans are merely members, not rulers, of the natural community. They must accept and embrace the inherent imperfections of life, including the inevitability of death.

In "The Promise," Jody makes a personal vow to take responsibility and become a more capable and active member of his community. Building on the lessons he learned in "The Gift" while caring for a pony, he now faces the challenge of raising the colt on his own. Recognizing the limits of what Billy can teach, Jody must gain experience through his own efforts. Billy emphasizes that this hands-on approach is "the only good way" (82) to learn, further reinforcing Carl's perspective that "he wants you to start right at the start. That's the only way to learn. Nobody can tell you anything" (86). Through these experiences, Steinbeck underscores the importance of self-discovery in developing responsibility, maturity, and understanding one's place within the natural and social world. The chance Jody receives in "The Promise" drives him to entrust to caring for the colt, symbolizing his commitment to tending to the farm community as a whole.

By the last chapter of *The Red Pony*, "The Leader of the People," Jody's ecological awareness is almost absolute. Now he ought to learn to interpret and evaluate how other people treat the land. Leopold discusses the impact of humans on Land Ethics:

The combined evidence of history and ecology seems to support one general deduction: the less violent the man-made changes, the greater the probability of successful readjustment in the pyramid. Violence, in turn, varies with human

population density; a dense population requires a more violent conversion. In this respect, North America has a better chance for permanence than Europe, if she can contrive to limit her density. (257)

Jody's Grandfather represents the "violent man-made changes" Leopold warns about, which involve slowly populating and respecting the needs of the biotic community.

Grandfather, though conflicted about the westward association he was part of, shows the dominant view that supports overpopulation, overproduction, and over-industrialization. Jody's enthusiasm to know about "Indians crossing the plains" (101) is thwarted when Grandfather reveals the fact about "westerling." Grandfather feels that "the crossing wasn't worth doing" (105). Jody sees his Grandfather's regret. The West offered new resources for profit. Leopold notes that "[m]any biota currently regarded as 'lands of opportunity' are in fact already subsisting on exploitative agriculture, i.e., they have already exceeded their sustained carrying capacity" (257). The approach Jody sees is still relevant today; rather than solving problems, people shift to new areas. Westering, as Steinbeck suggests, was a way to avoid solving ecological and residential issues. This philosophy's consequences are shown in Grandfather's regret and demonstrate Steinbeck's deep ecological values and environmental ethics. Jody starts to understand the importance of the human role in maintaining the ecosystem through Grandfather. After hearing, Grandfather repeats those old stories as mentioned:

It wasn't Indians that were important, or adventures, or even getting out here. It was a whole bunch of people made into one big crawling beast. And I was the head. It was westerling and westerling. Every man wanted something for himself, but the big beast that was all of them wanted only westerling. I was the leader, but if I hadn't been there, someone else would have been the head. The thing had to have a head. (119)

These lines reflect the theme of human ambition and collective movement toward goals, emphasizing the interdependence within a social or communal system. The narrator recognizes that while individual desires exist, every man wanted something for himself, there is a larger force or purpose that drives the group as a whole, the big beast that all of them wanted only westerling. The metaphor of the "head" illustrates leadership and responsibility, showing that the role of guiding or organizing the collective is crucial but replaceable, highlighting the functional interdependence of individuals within the system. In the context of *The Red Pony*, this citation can be interpreted as an analogy to

Jody's experiences: just as the head is responsible for guiding the collective, Jody must understand his role and responsibilities within his environment, including his interactions with animals and the land, to maintain balance and harmony in his biotic community. This aligns with Leopold's principle that ethical behavior involves recognizing one's place within the larger interconnected system of life.

Human beings are able to demolish any biotic community through what Leopold describes a "violent conversion" due to population density. At the end of *The Red Pony*, the grandfather's regret highlights the environmental crisis that both Steinbeck and Leopold predicted. The heading of the last chapter advocates that Jody should think about his place in the ecological community: "Maybe I could lead the people someday," he cautiously proposes (120). Jody envisions a type of leadership distinct from what his grandfather mourns.

This study infers that *The Red Pony* not only depicts the consequences of disrupting the natural order but also emphasizes the ethical and educational role of human engagement with the environment. Through Jody's experiences, Steinbeck illustrates that understanding one's place in the ecological community requires both personal responsibility and awareness of the interdependence between humans, animals, and land. The contrast between the grandfather's regret and Jody's cautious vision of leadership suggests that ecological consciousness involves learning from past mistakes while fostering a balanced and respectful relationship with nature. Ultimately, the novel conveys that ethical human action and environmental stewardship are inseparable from moral development, highlighting the need to preserve the integrity, stability, and harmony of the biotic community.

Conclusion

In conclusion, humankind is primarily connected to nature and cannot survive without its support and nourishment. In John Steinbeck's *The Red Pony*, the intricate interconnectedness of humans, animals, and land is masterfully depicted, illustrating the profound and often poignant relationships among these elements. Through the experiences of young Jody Tiflin on his family's ranch, Steinbeck explores the cyclical nature of life, growth, and death, emphasizing how each entity is inextricably linked. The animals on the ranch, from the small red pony to the old horse Easter, embody the themes

of hope, loss, and the passage of time, teaching Jody valuable lessons about responsibility, empathy, and the harsh realities of existence. The land itself, with its beauty and brutality, serves as a backdrop for the unfolding drama, reflecting the characters' internal struggles and triumphs. Steinbeck's rich descriptions of the natural world underscore its significance, suggesting that the land is both a nurturing force and an indifferent entity, shaping the lives of those who depend on it. The novelty of this research lies in its integrated ecological reading, which highlights not only the human-animal bond and land attachment but also the mutual interdependence among humans, animals, and the environment—an aspect that previous studies on *The Red Pony* have not fully explored. This study demonstrates that ecological consciousness in Steinbeck's narrative emerges through the dynamic interactions among all living and non-living elements, offering a fresh perspective on the ethical and emotional dimensions of human engagement with nature.

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